

Chambers of
RICHARD T. FIELDS
Presiding Judge



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Superior Court of California
County of Riverside

February 9, 2007

Re: Support of Assembly Bill 159

Dear friends and colleagues,

I wanted to take a moment to ask for your help in supporting legislation this year that is crucial to maintaining a strong and independent judiciary and providing the citizens of Riverside County the enhanced access to justice and court services to which they are entitled.

As you may know, according to California Department of Finance data from November 13, 2006, Riverside County is currently estimated to have 2,023,848 residents. From 1990 to 2006, the county's population has increased by 70.6%. On the U.S. Census Bureau's list of the 100 fastest growing counties, Riverside County ranks number 40 in the nation and number two in the state.

As of 1997, Riverside County had a total of 48 judges and 20 commissioners. One judgeship was added in 2001, bringing the total number of judges to 49. The number of commissioners has remained at 20. Thus, the total number of judicial officers for Riverside County is 69. This represents 3.4 judicial officers per 100,000 residents – the lowest percentage in the court's history, and far below the statewide ratio of 5.2 judicial officers per 100,000 population.

According to a Judicial Council judgeship needs study done in 2004, the Riverside County court system needed 121 judicial officers in that year - 52 additional positions to our current 69. This gap between the judicial resources we have and what is needed has continued to increase since the 2004 study. Resources for our criminal justice partners tend to keep pace or exceed the population growth. In the last five years, since the court received its one additional judgeship, the District Attorney's office gained 53 new positions, a 35.3% increase in staffing. The Public Defender's office increased 41.6% by adding 37 positions and the Sheriff's Department increased by 15% by adding 181 positions.

While these numbers paint a grim reality, there have been promising developments. The judicial gap was addressed, in part, last year through the creation of 50 new

judgeships in Senate Bill 56, seven of which will be allocated to Riverside County. While this was an important first step, it only begins to address the need for additional judgeships and we need to do everything possible to keep the legislative momentum moving in 2007.

The court was encouraged to see that the Governor's recently released budget includes \$27.8 million in 2007-08 and \$74.3 million in 2008-09 to fund 100 new judgeships over the next two years, 27 of which are expected to be allocated to the Inland Empire.

Additionally, we were notified recently by the Chief Justice that Assembly Bill 159 was introduced on January 18 to authorize 50 new trial court judgeships upon appropriation by the legislature in the 2007-08 fiscal year.

This is where you can help. It is one thing to have judges who have a vested interest in the court system advocating for additional judgeships. However, the court has no constituency of its own. Letters and phone calls from the citizens of the community who are adversely affected by the lack of resources can have a powerful impact on our area legislators. This issue is about more than overworked judicial officers. Justice delayed is justice denied and adversely affects the lives of those who need access to the courts, as well as those whose livelihoods depend on the court system.

I strongly encourage you to contact your legislators and urge support for Assembly Bill 159 this year. Thank you for your interest and support.

Sincerely,

Richard T. Fields

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